



Valley Broadcast Legends

Oral Histories

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Oral interview of

Stan Atkinson

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Interviewer: Steve Swatt

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Stan Atkinson's career as a television news reporter in California's major media markets spanned 50 years. He covered news worldwide, traveling to 18 countries for in-depth special television reports that became one of the hallmarks of his career. Stan worked as a producer, writer, reporter, and television news program anchor, and was also a co-owner of Channel 50 Television in Santa Rosa, California.

Stan Atkinson: For me, it's a story of forty-six years. Every moment I cherished. I can't tell you what it meant to me. I was so fortunate. I did so many things, everything from teaching journalism at Stanford to being a journalism fellow and being able to study at Stanford, working in television stations from Los Angeles at NBC, to starting a television station of our own in Santa Rosa, Channel 50.

The overseas foreign assignments were a high point of my life. I did something like twenty-six different assignments in thirty-five countries and went pretty much all over what we called the Third World in those days, that part of the world that was really threatened by communism, pretty much under communist control. And then a lot of community work, particularly in Sacramento, helped raise a lot of money to help people, something I have felt strongly personally about and felt that a prominent television station like Channel 3 should really be heavily involved with. Thankfully, they were. I couldn't have asked for more in that career I had. These forty-six years were the richest part of my life.

[00:01:21]

Swatt: So let's start at the beginning. You, I guess, fell in love with journalism in high school.

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Atkinson: I did. Yes, for me, journalism was the discovery that I made in high school and worked on the high school newspaper and ended up in the sports page, and then we ended up doing a radio show every Friday afternoon on a local station, and I thought, "Wow, this radio stuff is terrific." I didn't have to sit there and write stuff, copy for the newspaper. This is amazing. You can talk, you can ad lib. Of course, you had to work with notes and script, but whatever. The whole genre of radio just immediately appealed to me.

So I went and I got a first-class FCC license, which was—you had to go to a school and get a cram course to get it, but that was a gateway ticket to getting a job virtually anywhere in the country in those days. So I got my first job in Los Alamos, New Mexico, just before I got drafted into the Army during Korea.

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Swatt: And when was this?

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Atkinson: This was 1952. It was '51, 1951, that I got the license, the FCC license, and went to work in Los Alamos, New Mexico. And then in '52, I went in the Army. I'd never had any dramatic training of any kind, but I became an instructor. They said, "Oh, you were a radio announcer. You'll be a good instructor." And that was before they were going to ship me to Korea.

So I thought, "Okay, fine. I'll be anything. Just don't send me to Korea." [Laughs] And indeed, being an instructor worked out really well. I stayed at Fort Ord and was what we called a general subjects instructor. You had to stand before three hundred rather unhappy, usually sweaty, hot, and very uncomfortably attired trainees and keep them interested with the materials that you had to give. That was my training. I had to learn to stand on my feet, to get a rap going that was interesting, and try to keep the attention of these recalcitrant Army trainees. [Laughs] I learned a lot from that experience.

So when I went to Spokane for my first job out of the Army, I ended up getting the job in the radio station. The company built a TV station. One day they came back and they said, "Hey, you're going to go to TV."

And I said, "No, I like radio. I want to stay here."

And they said, "No, you're going to TV."

And I said, "Well, I can't, because I don't have a coat and a tie." [Laughs]

"Go get a coat and a tie. You're going to TV."

I went to the TV studio, started to work, and fell in love with it.

[00:04:28]

Swatt: And what did you do there? Everything?

[00:04:30]

Atkinson: In those days, we did everything. I did a kiddie show, I did the news, I did weather, did commercials, and then in the control room ran all the equipment, the switcher, the shader, operated the audio booth, actually edited commercials in and out of movies, which was our stock-in-trade. I mean, we were an ABC station, so we had ABC network, but there wasn't that much material available even from the network in those days, so a lot of what you had was syndicated material on film, so you had to understand how to splice the commercials in and out. So we did all of that, and so you learned a lot.

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Swatt: And television in those days was pretty brand new.

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Atkinson: Totally. As a matter of fact, one of the reasons I was unsure about working in television even in 1954 was there weren't any television stations. One of the reasons I was so concerned about making a personal investment in television, even in 1954, was there weren't many TV sets around. *[Laughs]* You began to wonder is television going to stick, is it going to work nationally. Well, of course, the technology improved, the prices came down, and everybody had a TV set. But just to give you a sense of what the world was like in 1954, vis-à-vis television, that was my mindset and I think many people that I worked with.

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Swatt: Nowadays, it is pretty taboo for a newsperson to be doing on-air commercials at the same time.

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Atkinson: Oh, yeah.

[00:06:25]

Swatt: Did you think about that at the time?

[00:06:25]

Atkinson: Oh, absolutely, yeah. No, we always put up a fuss against having to do commercials, and we did commercials, particularly at Channel 3 in the early days. I did Safeway commercials. I did a commercial in the middle of my eleven o'clock newscast, which was called the "Five-Minute News." I did "Five-Minute News" and "Five-Minute Sports," and I would stand there and do the first section of the news. And then they'd roll in a big table in front of me with Hostess Cinnamon Dainties *[phonetic]* on it. *[Laughs]* I would go into this routine selling the Hostess Cinnamon Dainties and holding them up and enthusing over how wonderful they were and how everybody at my house loved them. I would take them home and they'd sit on the kitchen sink for a whole week until finally my wife would throw them out. *[Laughs]* Any rate, long story short, Hostess Cinnamon Dainties put the eleven o'clock news on the map, put it on the air. In those days, the sales department, if they wanted us to do a commercial, that was it, it was a done deal, because the news was not making money. It was not seen as a moneymaker in those earliest days of the fifties and the sixties.

So before I left Channel 3 in 1963, I was doing commercials. I did commercials for Maita, Safeway, as I said, a number of—we all did, whether news or otherwise. And when I came back in '76, if a salesperson even made a move to walk up the stairs and go into the newsroom to try to put the fix on one of us to try to do commercials, he was thrown

out of the newsroom because the tail was wagging the dog. All of a sudden, news became the station's moneymaker.

[00:08:19]

Swatt: So after Spokane, was it Chico?

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Atkinson: No. Redding.

[00:08:24]

Swatt: Redding.

[00:08:24]

Atkinson: Yeah. Left Spokane in '56 and drove south, decided I didn't like the winters anymore, and said I was going to try to get the first job I could find. Got some gas in Redding. Getting back in the car, I said, "Are there any TV stations around here?"

The guy says, "Yeah, there's one that just opened up by the junior college."

I drove up, I walked in, and they were in a total fret. They couldn't get a signal to their new transmitter up on the top of a 5,000-foot mountain, and so they were very busy. They were trying to keep the station on the air, and here this stranger was walking in. And they said, "What do you want?"

And I said, "Well, I want a job."

They said, "Huh? What do you mean, you want a job?"

I said, "Yeah, I've been working for the ABC station in Spokane for two years."

"You've been in TV for two years?" Nobody could believe it. I was hired on the spot. That was 1956, and that's the way the business was. There just weren't people around who'd had any television experience of any kind. I mean, it was still such a fledgling industry.

At Channel 7 in Redding in those days, there was really no coverage of news on the street by any of us. It was rip and read, off the wires, you know, and doing as many commercials as any of us could possibly get done, and running camera and editing syndicated films, putting commercials in them, announcing from the booth, running switcher and shader and all the equipment, as well as doing stuff on the air.

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Swatt: After Redding, Sacramento?

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Atkinson: Mm-hmm.

[00:10:24]

Swatt: KCRA your first stint?

[00:10:24]

Atkinson: Yeah, KCRA. In 1957, got the job the first time at KCRA and came to work. Gene Kelly, who had founded the station and raised the money and put it on the air, he was a remarkable man. He was the epitome of the self-made, successful businessman, creative, entrepreneurial, and tough, tough to the core. Scared the hell out of me. If I ever saw him walking down the hallway towards me, I'd go the other way into the bathroom or something, and especially after what happened when I went on the air the first night. He came into the staff morning the next morning and said, "Who the hell hired that kid?" Here I was, I was doing eleven o'clock newscasts, and I looked like I was fifteen years old. *[Laughs]* I wore a butch haircut, flattop.

I heard about it, and I thought, "I'm going to be outta here." But, you know, something really interesting happened. All these sweet old ladies called the station that afternoon and evening and said, "Who was that sweet young man that you had doing the news last night? We so enjoyed him. We're going to watch that newscast every night. We like him so much." And I always said it was the blue-hairs who saved my career, because it was almost over that day.

[00:12:03]

Swatt: Back in those days, late fifties, early sixties when you were at Channel 3, Channel 3, it seems to me, was really kind of cutting-edge. It was different than most other news operations in terms of their focus on hard news, on investigative news. Am I correct?

[00:12:20]

Atkinson: And longform news, yeah. That was Bob Kelly. The two brothers, Bob and John Kelly, ran the station, and Bob was the true visionary. John was a great businessman like his father, and knew how to generate money and revenue for the station, and Bob was a thinker and had this vision of what news could be on a local television station, which I'm not sure anybody else in this country was thinking much about. They were beginning to try to figure out ways that news could make more money. Well, Bob's intention was to make more programming that was news-centered, and it would draw an audience and, of course, along the way make revenue as well. And it all worked out. He was terrific. I mean, he really was one of the—I call him one of the godfathers of local television news and showing what it could be.

And other stations saw what we were doing and what Channel 3 was doing and the success we had, and started to copy what we were doing. For instance, the one-hour newscast, which wasn't done anywhere, that was us. That was Bob Kelly's idea. Instead

of half hour, why not make it a one-hour newscast and not just do one newscast at six o'clock or six-thirty. How about a newscast at five o'clock as well as six o'clock and then eleven o'clock? So that's where the inspiration and instigation for more news and making everything we did more professional and more content-wise better as a product, not just for people to watch, but for commercial sponsors to want to be a part of.

[00:14:18]

Swatt: Would you say that your trip to Vietnam was probably your highlight during that stint at KCRA?

[00:14:24]

Atkinson: Well, I won a national award, and the award was presented in New York by Lyndon Johnson. He was vice president then, and he was about to take a trip around the world on behalf of John Kennedy's wish that Lyndon would report back on some of the trouble points around the world. So we ended up in Saigon, and during that trip I made some contact with some very interesting people who told me about this fantastic priest who had his own little army down in the south and really was kicking the bejeezus out of the Viet Cong, which wasn't much happening anywhere else, and I met him. He was in Saigon.

I came back and I pitched the story to Bob Kelly, and I wanted to go back and do the story about this remarkable man and these people who loved him, fought for him, and had created such what turned out to be this little oasis of freedom out in the middle of communist-held territory in the southern end of Vietnam. And Bob agreed, and I went back and I did what was called *The Village That Refuses to Die*. Interesting, the hour-long documentary got a lot of play nationally. It played on other stations around the country, and the Pentagon picked it up and used it as a training piece because there wasn't any film showing what Vietnam was really like, other than National Geographic films that really didn't speak to some of the hardships and kinds of things that American troops were going to run into.

I feel like I was an integral part of Bob Kelly's vision in those days, because I produced what really was the first documentary that Channel 3 ever had. It was about this terrible, terrible forest fire, the Donner fire. That would have been, gosh, 1959, maybe '60, and I had to go to San Francisco to a production house to actually put it all together, because we really didn't have the equipment in those days to do it. But it was called *Black Harvest*, and it was just a half hour long, but it was very dramatic. I mean, the drama was built in with all of these lives that were being threatened and lives that were having to someday come back and try to rebuild themselves because they'd lost everything they had in the fire. Believe me, in those days—I mean, we think nothing of that today. We see that each and every year during fire season, but in those days, people hadn't seen that on television and certainly not on local television, dealing with a fire that had been very prominent locally. And the success of that documentary was

tremendous, and I think that was one of the things that really emphasized to Bob that he was on the right path. So when I went to him with the Father Hoa idea and to go to Vietnam and do the story, even though it was in Vietnam, didn't have anything to do with Sacramento or Northern California, he said, "Let's do it."

[00:18:16]

Swatt: You were doing things at Channel 3 in those days that just were not being done in local television.

[00:18:22]

Atkinson: Exactly, yeah. And all of the assignment stuff that I did, the foreign assignments, which were my self-selected assignments that the station would sign off on, but I would do the research on where I wanted to go, talk about what I thought it might cost, which was always way less than what it ended up costing. *[Laughs]* But, you know, nobody ever raised hell about it, I think because those foreign assignments, all of them that I did from Bosnia to El Salvador to Afghanistan to Angola, Cambodia, all places that were in the news at the time, because they generated tremendous interest in those places and particularly because it was a guy locally who was doing it. And I know darn well that John Kelly—people would come up to him and say, "Boy, that was great stuff that Atkinson did in Afghanistan." And, of course, that helped to fuel my being able to continue to do it.

But it was part of the legacy of Channel 3 to go beyond the pale and do stuff nobody else was doing. The only person that was doing that regularly in local television elsewhere in the country was Bill Kurtis, WBBM in Chicago, who I got to know when I was at NBC in L.A. He and I both worked the Manson trial together. But other than that, it was spotty. Somebody'd go do something, but it wasn't as regular. And I was doing one or two assignments a year.

[00:20:09]

Swatt: We'll get back to that, your overseas assignments in a few minutes. I want to move on with the chronology. After Channel 3, briefly tell us what happened.

[00:20:18]

Atkinson: I left Channel 3. I had produced, with a friend of Channel 3, who actually had been news director and program director, a documentary as part of a series. This guy I worked with, Tom Green *[phonetic]*, knew David Wolper. David Wolper had started out as a film salesman. He would come around and sell movies to television stations. And being a program director, Tom dealt with him and would select the movies and make the deal with Wolper. Well, Wolper then becomes a big deal when he does *The Race for Space*, which was a documentary series that was sparked by the Sputnik episode from USSR and their getting into space before we did. So Wolper became overnight a big Hollywood producer of documentaries, and Tom said, "Wow. Let's see if we can do

something for him,” because he and I were both itching to go off and do something like that, to make documentaries and to leave daily news.

So, long story short, we did, and we did part of one his earlier series called “The Story of,” and “The Story of” could be like the story of a football star was John Brodie, the story of a rock musician was Fabian in those days. The starlet was Stephanie Powers. This is all circa early seventies, late sixties. So these are names to a lot of people they’re not familiar with. But at any rate, we did the story of a country doctor, and we found a wonderful doc up in—

[00:22:11]

Cyndy Green: Let me hop in. Angels Camp, Dr. Albasio. My husband’s doctor.

[00:22:22]

Atkinson: Is that right?

[00:22:24]

Cindy: Okay, I’m going to hop out now.

[00:22:25]

Atkinson: Oh, that’s wonderful. Thank you, Cyndy, of course.

So we found this wonderful country doctor named Dante Albasio in Angels Camp, and we did this half-hour documentary about him for the series, and eventually Wolper called me and said, “Do you want to come to Hollywood and work on the series down here?” He said, “We’re doing a different one now called *Hollywood and the Stars*.”

So I did. We moved to Los Angeles and did two pictures for him, one with Bette Davis, which was more fun than I could ever have imagined, because she was just great, and Bing Crosby.

[00:23:06]

Swatt: But that didn’t last too long. You went back into journalism.

[00:23:09]

Atkinson: No, it didn’t. Well, actually what happened was out of that I ended up forming a partnership with another fellow in a production company, and we did work. We did some very good work, and we, you know, made a little bit of money along the way, but we were kind of keeping ourselves alive. We weren’t a big hit or big success. One day we looked at each other, and I said, “You know, I’m kind of missing daily news.”

And he said, “You know, I want to be a big-time director.” And he went his way and did. He became a major Hollywood director, producing and directing a lot of the top syndicated shows of the eighties and nineties, and I ended up coming back to the news business and Channel 3.

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Swatt: Before you came back, though, you had a stop in Los Angeles.

[00:24:03]

Atkinson: Yes.

[00:24:04]

Swatt: Correct. So tell us about that. How did that come about? You had a rather unique beat.

[00:24:11]

Atkinson: I left L.A. We left L.A. When I left Los Angeles, I got an offer from Channel 2, KTVU in Oakland, and I took it and went to work for them as a reporter and anchor, and I was there about a year and a half. And I was interested in seeing if I could expand my CV, my résumé, and got wind of a really interesting program at Stanford which was sponsored by the Ford Foundation. It was called the Ford Journalism Program, and what it was, you had a chance to go to Stanford, and they gave you a stipend which would support you for a year, and you could pick and choose from any of the courses on campus that you wanted to audit. And as it turned out, all the professors were kind of interested in having you in the class because all of us, the twenty-five of us, were people who'd been out in the world, you know, for ten or twenty years and had some experience that maybe would bring a fresh view of whatever the subject matter was into that classroom.

So I felt that maybe a journalism specialty that hadn't really been created was aborning, and maybe that was in the field of the environmental coverage, and so I kind of picked and chose the courses at Stanford that related to environmental science. There was no program for that. It was just you went around and you did biology, you did some geology courses that related to weather. And through all of that, I kind of left and thought, "Maybe I can go sell myself as an environmental reporter." Sure enough, I got hired at KNBC, Channel 4, the NBC station in Los Angeles, and I was there for two and a half years.

My environmental career didn't last very long because we lived in West Los Angeles, not far from Tate house, where, of course, Charles Manson and his minions did their ugly, ugly murders, and that was the beginning of sixteen months of virtually daily coverage of the Manson case, which was a big deal in my career, but it became drudgery going into court every day and going to lunch and coming back to court, then driving out to Burbank and doing a live piece for the six o'clock and putting a package together for the eleven. It was a routine. You know, none of us in this business—one of the virtues that we enjoy most about this business is every day's different, every day, and the whole idea of going to a court and covering, even though you were covering this weird and wild case with Manson and those girls in the courtroom, it was drudgery.

[00:27:47]

Swatt: It was drudgery, but it was one of the biggest stories in the nation, perhaps in the world at the time, and I've heard you say before that it was the biggest story you ever covered.

[00:27:59]

Atkinson: Yeah. Oh, it was, there's no question. Looking back on it, it was the biggest story ever. But, you know, it's so funny because at the time you don't really think much about it. A friend of mine was a prominent Hollywood literary agent, and he wanted to come to the trial. He called and, "Can I come in?"

I said, "Sure, come sit with us." And so he kept visiting, and he'd go to lunch with us sometimes and got to meet other people.

When it was over, he asked me and my sketch artist, Jean Witoff [phonetic], if we wanted to maybe do a book on it. And Jean and I looked at each other and we said, "Are you crazy? We just spent sixteen months on this thing, day in and day out. The last thing in the world we want to do is to sit down and spend six months recalling everything and putting it in print." I said, "You know somebody who might be interesting or really good at it would be Vince Bugliosi." [Laughs] And he got Vince Bugliosi to write, of course, *Helter Skelter*, which is one of the biggest crime books of the *century*. So there went another opportunity, [demonstrates]. [Laughs]

[00:29:13]

Swatt: That must have been a journalist's dream. You had a lead story every night for sixteen months.

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Atkinson: Oh, yeah, yeah, but it really was kind of hard. The routine of it was hard.

[00:29:27]

Swatt: And I know after that stint in Los Angeles, you had a stint in Santa Rosa, where you actually went into ownership.

[00:29:36]

Atkinson: Yeah, that's right.

[00:29:37]

Swatt: And that was, I guess, exhilarating but also a painful experience, looking back.

[00:29:41]

Atkinson: Yeah, it was. Left Los Angeles with a couple of guys at KNBC, with this notion of putting a television station on the air in Santa Rosa. The FCC had parceled off a channel, Channel 50, for a TV station there. And with our research, we thought the market was ripe for it, so moved up there, spent about a year and a half raising the

money, going through the FCC, the license procedures and everything. It was hard work, and we got the license and we went on the air. And about a year later, we went off the air. We just simply didn't have enough money upfront. We needed more to get us through that first year and maybe take us halfway or all the way into the second year, because we were still competing with actually television from Sacramento and San Francisco. Because in those days it was before cable, people were receiving TV stations off their antennas, and many times people had antennas that were pointing toward Sacramento and San Francisco. So the revenue, advertising revenues, weren't there sufficient enough to support it.

So one of the saddest days of my life was the day that we had to stand before twenty, twenty-five dedicated mostly young people who had come to work for us and who we really had taught TV to and say it was over. We had to shut down shop. Happily, everybody did well.

After Santa Rosa, Stanford had started this graduate summer program and asked me if I would come and teach it, and so I did. It was the first year of it, as I recall, and that was a lot of fun. But what happened was fascinating. I was really, obviously, dejected, depressed, disappointed in myself after this whole Channel 50 experience, and thought, "You know, I don't think I'll ever do television again," and that was kind of my mindset at the time. And then they said, "Come to Stanford and teach this course during the summer." I had to reflect on everything that had happened in my life and my career to put together a course schedule that would be worthy for these twenty or so graduate students who wanted really to get serious about going into television news, and that process somehow ignited a whole new sense of self and where I felt I really belonged and certainly wanted to be, and that was back in daily news.

So I reached out and I got some interest around the Bay Area from other stations to go to work and, in fact, did some auditions, and Channel 2 hired me as an anchor and reporter, and I was there until Channel 3 came along and asked me to come back, and that was 1976. Best decision I ever made.

[00:33:21]

Swatt: Really?

[00:33:22]

Atkinson: Coming back.

[00:33:23]

Swatt: And that's because of the freedom you were given at Channel 3 to go to a couple dozen foreign hotspots and report all over the world, right?

[00:33:33]

Atkinson: Yeah. The reason is multifaceted, because when I came back in '76, the effect of the Bob Kelly attitude about what television news should be had really taken hold, and so the station had a *huge* commitment to news, and it had paid off because the station was already number one in radio and number one in television. In those days, they had a radio station. And it was all driven by revenues that advertisers wanted to give to Channel 3 or to the radio station because that's where people were watching or listening, because they wanted to see what local news was available each and every night on television, and the station to watch was Channel 3. So I walked into a very different environment than what it had been when we were struggling to make a case for what television news was and how important it could be to a TV station's whole makeup in the universe in those early days in the fifties and sixties.

[00:34:54]

Swatt: So you traveled around the world.

[00:34:57]

Atkinson: Yes.

[00:34:58]

Swatt: Many times.

[00:34:58]

Atkinson: Right.

[00:34:59]

Swatt: What was the most dangerous hotspot you've been in? You were in so many Third World countries where there was a lot of upheaval and turmoil, but you had some pretty frightening experiences.

[00:35:15]

Atkinson: Yeah. Of the couple of dozen foreign assignments I did, I think the scariest was Somalia. It was right after *Black Hawk Down*, and Mogadishu, the capital, was just crazy. I mean, everybody was packing weapons, even twelve-year-olds were walking around with Uzis, and we were constantly under siege, any of us in the press, wherever we went. Wherever we went, we drove in these big Toyota trucks that had three or four gunnies, guys packing, in the back of the truck. We had to make a very circuitous route to get down to the airport when we'd finished shooting, we'd finished the assignment, and to try to find a hop to get out of there and come back home. But, yeah, it was crazy, I mean, very scary.

Afghanistan was scary, but I always had the sense in Afghanistan—we traveled with a couple of dozen Mujahideen, and those guys were dedicated to protecting us because

they knew that what we were doing was so essential to what their cause was. They were fighting the Russians, and America was very much in support of Afghanistan at that time and what these men were fighting and dying for. But there wasn't a lot of coverage of it. There wasn't a lot of reporters going into—at least from the U.S. There were from Europe. There were a lot of European reporters that went in to cover Afghanistan, but not in America. So even though we had some very close calls, we had to go in disguise for much of the time, it felt a lot safer there because you had so much protection.

El Salvador was always dangerous. We got held up and robbed a couple of times, lots of gunfights. Cambodia and Thailand and the border, where all the refugees were, that's where I was doing a standup as this refugee camp was just erupting into this riot that had been sparked by the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese, who were fighting the Cambodians at the time. I mean, it was a crazy mêlée of political collisions there, and I'm standing and doing this standup, and you can hear the .30-caliber round go right behind me as I'm doing the standup. *[Laughs]* But I kept doing the standup.

[00:38:12]

Swatt: Well, you're supposed to have assignments that keep your journalistic juices flowing, right?

[00:38:16]

Atkinson: Absolutely. *[Laughs]* It was.

[00:38:18]

Swatt: That's what makes it all worthwhile.

[00:38:19]

Atkinson: It was exciting. It was exciting and it was fun. I always had a contact wherever I went that I could build on and use to ingratiate ourselves into whatever the environment was, people who would help make contacts and set up interviews and take us on whatever rounds that they did to—in most cases, it was centered around refugee relief, and that's what I ended up—the people I worked with.

[00:38:54]

Swatt: You were, as an anchor at KCRA, and even earlier, I guess, you were at the top of your game when local television started to embrace women as serious journalists and news anchors. Was that a difficult transition for you?

[00:39:12]

Atkinson: No, it was wonderful. During my time, my early time, the rule was male and male co-anchors, and then women started to sit on the set as kind of an experiment as co-anchors. Every one of them that I ever worked with became a dear friend. Most of them I still stay in touch with. My admiration for their skill, their intelligence, and the part they played in, I always felt, making me look better, was huge.

I think it all started—and it was strange, because in the earliest days, women were only given the soft stories to go cover as reporters, but then all of a sudden, management began to realize, you know, “These are really good reporters. Maybe they ought to do more than just cover the fundraising beat.” And I think it was because women quickly established themselves as solid reporters on the street, then they got an opportunity to sit on the set as a co-anchor or as an anchor, and, believe me, my career was blessed by it, not just for the sake of wonderful friends that I made, every one of them was a different person, every one in her own way was an incredible partner to work with and a huge contribution to whatever success I had in this business.

[00:41:08]

Swatt: It’s my understanding that early on when women first were put on the set, they weren’t allowed to do crime stories or financial stories because there was a feeling with had no credibility in that arena.

[00:41:20]

Atkinson: Yeah, yeah. The problem with seeing women as could they be good reporters, that kind of fed over into TV in the anchor roles they first assumed, because the feeling was you shouldn’t have a woman doing a crime story, a hard news story, but let her read the financial stuff. And that didn’t last for long. I mean, these women were just too good, too sharp, too well prepared, and as ambitious as any of us were to make and create good opportunities for themselves.

[00:42:00]

Swatt: We want to mention that you also ended your career at KQVR in Sacramento. In looking back over your entire television broadcast career, how do you put into words the technological changes that we’ve seen in the broadcast journalism field over forty-six, forty-seven years that you’ve been in it?

[00:42:25]

Atkinson: Yeah, the technological changes in this business are just remarkable. You know, when I started out, it was all around film, 16mm film, and that was the trade of our generation, and, you know, I could turn 16mm film every way but loose. Videotape came along, and I said, “I don’t think so. I’ll let the camera.” *[Laughs]* By then we had people who were dedicated as editors and shooters, camera people, photographers, so I really didn’t have to learn.

But, yeah, the technology has—and, you know, those assignments that I did, God bless them, the shooters who went with me, we had to lug along sometimes as many as fifteen, twenty batteries we had to take with us, to ship with us, because the places we went, there was no 110 or 220. You knew that you were going to be out in the boonies in Afghanistan or El Salvador or Cambodia or the border, and there wasn’t anyplace to plug in to recharge the equipment, so you had to have enough battery power. Actually,

in the trips into Afghanistan, the last one we did, which was a long trip inside, we were out of business. Coming back, I think we shot the last of our last battery, and if something had happened after that, we were dead in the water. So today the technology is such that these people can take off and they go into the woods and shoot and have power for as long as they need it. Would have been a blessing if we'd had it back in the day.

[00:44:34]

Swatt: Before we end, one, I want to touch on your charity work, which has been really remarkable in the Sacramento community. I gather you see that as taking advantage on behalf of the community of your star status.

[00:44:51]

Atkinson: The opportunity that I had to do charitable work, especially in the last phase of my career when I came back in '76, although I did some of it in the early days at Channel 3, too, was really a high point for me. I always felt strongly about it, that those of us who people came to know each and every night by virtue of television, and those of us who maybe had a little standing in people's eyes because we were credible newspeople that they accepted, maybe we could help with good causes, good works in the community, help raise money to help them. So I did.

Actually, it was John Kelly who came to me and wanted me to get involved with Mercy Hospital in the earliest days when I came back in '76, and that turned into a very long run, about twenty-seven years on the board and some great successes helping raise money for all the good programs that Mercy did. There were many other charities. I did a golf tournament for five years after I retired, and we raised a couple hundred thousand dollars every year for Sierra Adoption and a number of really good programs all over the community. So it was a great sense of personal satisfaction and it was really good for the TV station.

[00:46:27]

Swatt: Can you quantify how much money you think you had raised?

[00:46:31]

Atkinson: Oh, yeah. I figured it out once. I think the total amount of money that I was a part of in raising for local charitable programs was about \$8 million over the years that I did it, and a lot of that was generated from doing the Jerry Lewis Telethon for fifteen years for Muscular Dystrophy Association on Channel 3, and that raised a 300,000 every year.

[00:47:05]

Swatt: Thank you.